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ABSTRACT

A great deal has been written in the English as a second language (ESL) literature on what vocabulary building entails and on how vocabulary should be taught. There is, however, little consensus on methodology and there are few good vocabulary texts. In order to develop a procedure for vocabulary building in ESL, some recent articles on vocabulary are reviewed. These articles include studies on first language acquisition, second language learning, semantic relationships between lexical items, and the effectiveness of inductive versus deductive teaching methods. Three basic assumptions are accepted as important for direct vocabulary instruction and for facilitating vocabulary building. These assumptions are: (1) collocations, or associations, have to be taught; (2) knowing a word entails knowledge of the network of associations between that word and other words in the language; and (3) knowing a word means knowing the semantic value of the word. Two vocabulary exercises are presented to illustrate the theory and method derived from the review of the literature. Both are presented inductively; the first illustrates an exercise on semantic field relationship, and the second is on collocations. (AMH)

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# Vocabulary Building for University-Bound ESL Students

Vicki L. Smith

Vocabulary building is a much neglected skill area in ESL. Though much has been written in the ESL literature on what vocabulary building entails and how vocabulary should be taught, few good vocabulary texts have been written in recent years.

The purpose of this paper is to bring together the recent articles on vocabulary and apply them to the development of vocabulary materials for university-bound ESL students. These articles include studies on first language acquisition, second language learning, semantic relationships between lexical items, and the effectiveness of inductive versus deductive teaching methods. This paper concludes with a sample vocabulary lesson incorporating the conclusions and inferences gleaned from these studies.

Vocabulary building has been a much discussed though rarely taught skill in ESL programs across the country. Since the cognitivist movement, which promoted language learning as a process of rule formation and hypothesis testing, many ESL programs offer a four-skill area curriculum: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. However, though the cognitivist approach shows a renewed interest in extensive vocabulary teaching, no method of teaching it has been developed. Often it

is subsumed under the skill area of reading, where it is taught rather haphazardly. It is not that a reading class is inappropriate for teaching vocabulary, but often the time spent on vocabulary must be limited due to reading concerns.

With the division of skill areas came a problematic development. The skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are easily developed into neatly defined curricula; each skill is indexed in terms of difficulty, and inexhaustible amounts of materials have been developed on how to teach it. The four basic skill areas are easily analyzed and gradable. So, too, is grammar, though, strictly speaking, it is not a skill area. However, the vocabulary of a language remains elusive for several reasons. First of all, the number of vocabulary items one can teach appears to be infinite. Second, there is no strictly empirical method of selecting a finite set of vocabulary items to teach. Third, vocabulary is, for all practical purposes, ungradable in terms of difficulty. Fourth, there is no exact one-to-one correspondance between a word in the native language and a word in the target language. Fifth, it is rare that a word has only one meaning. Sixth, the words of a language are interrelated on a variety of levels (e.g., phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic), and each of these levels has a variety of interelationships. If one were adamant about teaching all of these interrelationships, one could conceivably spend an entire semester on one word. Furthermore, linguists have yet to define all of these relationships. Finally, there is the problem of testing. How does one test the depth of knowledge a student has of a word? With all of these problems in mind, it is easily seen why direct vocab-

ulary teaching has been alternately emphasized by theorists and held in abeyance by methodologists. Thus, a vicious cycle is created: no one teaches vocabulary because of a lack of materials, and materials are not developed because no one teaches vocabulary.

The one who suffers from this lack of vocabulary teaching is the student. Placed in a university setting after having completed an intensive English program, "the learner is faced with a disasterous shortage of vocabulary resources . . ."(Twaddell 1972:268). "Students, upon leaving the sheltered atmosphere of the ESL classroom, often find themselves at a literal 'loss for words' in the uncontrolled English speaking environment which they encounter in the normal American university" (Judd 1978:71). Put more quantitatively, Diller (1972) claims that a twelve-year-old native speaker of English commands a vocabulary of approximately 135,000 words. "A non-native speaker . . . cannot hope to communicate with a native speaker of English on the basis of a vocabulary restricted to 6,000 words"(Ramsey 1981:16). Wilkins has the final word: "Without grammar very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed"(1976:111).

Students themselves have shown concern for vocabulary. Hatch (1978) states that adult language learners have been telling us of their concern for vocabulary for years. Stafford and Covitt (1976) and Schlue (1976) also point out that learners perceive "errors" in their speech and in their writing as much as, if not more, in terms of vocabulary choice as in terms of grammar. Krashen (1981), too, has commented that adults carry around dictionaries, not grammar books.

That vocabulary should be taught is obvious. However, a controversy in the ESL literature exists as to whether it should be taught directly (Bright and McGregor 1970; Judd 1978) or indirectly (Mackey 1967; Rivers 1968). It is the position of this paper that students need as much lexical input as possible, and therefore vocabulary should be taught both directly and indirectly; however, the focus will be on direct vocabulary instruction.

How vocabulary should be taught raises an issue for which there is little more than suggestions in the ESL literature. The state of the art in direct vocabulary instruction comprises a handful of articles which addresses two major issues: syntagmatic (Oller 1972b; Brown 1974; Richards 1976; Kopec 1979) and paradigmatic (Nilsen 1974, 1976; Richards 1976; McKay 1978; Ramsey 1981) relationships between words. The most comprehensive outline of the nature of lexical competence to date is an article by Richards (1976) in which eight assumptions are delineated, three of which will be discussed here.

> Assumption 2: Knowing a word means knowing the degree of probability of encountering that word in speech or print. For many words, we also know the sort of words most likely to be associated with the word.

By association, Richards here means 'collocation'. He says,"Knowledge of collocation means that on encountering the word 'fruit' we can expect the words 'ripe', 'green' (=not ripe), 'sweet', 'bitter', etc., that for 'meat' we might expect 'tender', 'tough'"(1976:79). Mackey (1967) states that certain words may also be collocated with a certain

structure word, such as 'box' (of matches), 'glass' (of water), 'head' (of a pin), and 'page' (of a book).

The most developed view on the teaching of collocations is that of Brown (1974). According to Brown, vocabulary is not only a tool to understand what is read or heard, but also a tool of anticipation. To develop this skill of expectancy, the student should have a firm knowledge of collocations, "which is concerned with the company that a word keeps. The words, by being used together, help defind and delimit each other. A native speaker knows that there is a high probability of some words co-occurring within a given context"(1974:1-2). Oller (1972b) states that words are learned more quickly when put in sequence because the learner has come to expect what likely preceded and what will likely follow the sequence.

In her justification for teaching collocations, Brown gives the following evidence: 1) They reinforce the fact that language is spoken and read in chunks; 2) high-proficiency learners rely on associated meanings as input into memory; 3) collocational groups are also rhythm groups; 4) because collocations define and delimit each other, their defining power can help the student infer meaning from context; and 5) from the knowledge of common collocations, the student can more easily understand uncommon or technical ones, such as 'biological clock' (1974: 2-3).

As a final word on the importance of collocations, Kopec strongly suggests, "Never pass by an opportunity to teach and reinforce a vocabulary item. Furthermore, always relate an item to an associated form . . . . Always treat a new word as needing an association"(Kopec 1979:56).

Assumption 6: Knowing a word entails knowledge of the network of associations between that word and other words in the language.

Assumption 7: Knowing a word means knowing the semantic value of a word.

By associations, Richards here means 'paradigmatic relationships'. Though collocations are extremely important, they do not constitute the complete realm of word associations. He states, "Words do not exist in isolation. Their meanings are defined through their relationships with other words and it is through understanding these relationships that we arrive at our understanding of words"(1976:81).

Evidence for paradigmatic organization of vocabulary in memory comes from a variety of studies, a few of which will be reviewed here. Language acquisition studies have shown that it is precisely along paradigmatic lines that children acquire vocabulary in their first language. According to Clark (1978):

> Children do not build up their lexicon at random, choosing a word here and there. What they talk about first is determined by general cognitive principles. And one they have acquired one or two words in a particular (conceptual) domain, they are likely to over-extend them to cover other categories within the domain. Later, they add further items to the domain and restrict the items acquired earlier (1978:34).

Further evidence comes from children learning a second language. Swain, Naiman and Dumas (1978) conducted a study on English-speaking children learning French. Their translation data showed evidence of the

organization of new vocabulary into conceptual domains, or semantic fields as they are sometimes called:

> Another interesting finding from the translation data was that frequently the English word given, although not a lexical equivalent of the French word, was a member of the same semantic category. For example, 'water', 'milk', and 'coffee' were given as translations of 'le lait' thus maintaining the semantic category of something to drink. Similarly, 'jar', 'box', 'plastic jar', and 'little package' were given as translations of 'la boite' thus maintaining the semantic category of container (1978:305-6).

Strick (1980), in his research on the semantic domains for native speakers of English and Farsi and Iranian students learning English as a second language, outlines three stages of development of second language semantic competence: First, the learner tries to fit target language into native language categories. Second, the learner develops semantic structures possessing salient culturally independent dimensions along general cognitive principles. These semantic structures may be identical to neither the native language structures nor the target language structures. Second language development is thus a process of approximation to L2 cultural orientation as it is organized in semantic domains of the target language. Finally, as the L2 learner becomes better oriented within the second language culture, the salience of universal dimensions (those which children utilize in learning their first language) give way to an appropriate organization of semantic fields within the second language.

> Perceiving phenomena initially with respect to universal dimensions could reflect a general strategy of second language learners in categorizing their experiences. Moreover, universal dimensions qualify as the most efficient type of parallel structure for learners to utilize in their acquisition of second language semantic structures because such dimensions share common constraints across languages (1980:172).

These studies imply that semantic field analysis in the classroom would be beneficial to ESL students since it is through the development of semantic fields in memory that students learn and acquire words. Nilsen (1974, 1976), a proponent of the language-as-field approach, suggests a paradigmatically-based vocabulary presentation with the following types of fields: 1) hierarchies (man, primate, mammal, vertebrate, animal), 2) matrices (kinship terminology), 3) cycles (respiratory and digestive systems), and 4) processes (changing fuel to motion). He also suggests that paradigmatic relationships between words should be presented before syntagmatic relationships:

> If words indeed are meaningful out of context, and if it is a function of the grammar of a language to place words into a linguistic context which is compatible with a limited number of their potential meanings, then it would seem that from both the research and from the pedagogical points of view we need to deal with the basic meanings of words before we will be very effective in finding out how the meanings are affected by putting words together in

sentences, for by wording out the syntagmatic meaning before we work out the paradigmatic meaning would seem to be to be putting the cart before the horse (1976:100).

In developing lessons for the presentation of semantic fields, I considered a variety of studies which focused on the effectiveness of deductive and inductive approaches to language presentation (Corman 1957; Tallmadge 1968; Greeno 1972). These studies show that an inductive, learning by discovery approaches appear to be more effective to all students as a whole than the deductive, rule-learning approaches. When students are separated by ability (Greeno 1972), the bright subjects, as intuition would tell us, learn quite a bit in a relatively short time by either method. The low ability students take longer to accomplish the discovery-learning task and they learn less in the process. Greeno reports that average-ability students show differing results:

> Subjects whose ability scores were intermediate provided the results of greatest interest. If these subjects are identified by the MSAT, their performance in discovery and rule learning is practically indistinguishable. However, when we use the scores obtained in tests of background concepts and arithmetic skills, the method used makes quite a difference to subjects with intermediate ability. Especially when the division is made using the test concepts, the two procedures required about the same amount of time, but subjects apparently learned more from the discovery procedure than from the rule procedure (1972:361-2).

Thus it would appear that an inductive approach would be more effective to a greater number of students than a deductive approach, unless of course, the students were divided according to general ability, a situation which is rare if nonexistent in ESL programs across the country.

In summary then, teaching both syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships between words should be an integral part of any vocabulary lesson, paradigmatic relationships should be taught before syntagmatic relationships, and an inductive presentation would be an appropriate method. Following is a vocabulary exercise presented inductively (though easily adjusted to a deductive approach) followed by an exercise on collocations. One way in which I have taught this particular semantic field (Relationship) with great success is to have the students answer the questions in exercise 1 while I build the semantic field on the board after each set of questions, though many methods are possible.

Exercise 1: Semantic Field of Relationship

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| same[1] | equivalent | parallel | similar |
| same[2] | homogeneous | equal | comparable |
| identical | homologous | | analogous |

1. same, identical, similar

   a. Mr. Jones' hat is the same as Mr. Smith's hat.
   b. Mr. Jones and Mr. Smith have identical hats.
   c. Mr. Jones and Mr. Smith have similar hats.

In which sentence(s) can you distinguish between the two hats?
In which sentence(s) can you not distinguish between the two hats?
Which is more specific in meaning, same or identical?
Write a sentence with identical in the form "X identical Y".
Write a sentence with similar in the form "X similar Y".
What did you have to add to each sentence to make it grammatical?
How is same and identical different from similar in meaning?

2. same[1], same[2]

a. Mr. Jones' hat is the same as Mr. Smith's hat.
d. Mr. Jones wore the same hat yesterday and today.

In which sentence is there only one hat?
What is the difference between same in sentence (a) and same in sentence (d)?

3. equivalent

e. $0^{o}C$ is equivalent to $32^{o}F$.
f. $0^{o}C$ and $32^{o}F$ are equivalent.
g. The English equivalent of "amigo" is "friend".
h. One dollar is equivalent to four French francs.

What part of speech is equivalent in (f)? In (g)?
What prepositions can follow equivalent?
Can you distinguish between two equivalent things?
Is equivalent general or specific in meaning?
Rewrite sentence (g) using the phrase "is equivalent to".
Rewrite sentence (h) using the phrase "the equivalent of".

4. homogeneous, homologous

i. This neighborhood is culturally homogeneous.
j. A bird's wing and a man's arm are homologous appendages.

What can you say about the neighborhood in (j)?
Why do you think a bird's wing and a man's arm can be compared in (i)?
Are these words general or specific in meaning?
Rewrite (j) using the phrase "X homologous Y".
What preposition did you use after homologous?

5. parallel

k. That country has paralleled India in development.
l. College Avenue is parallel to Shields Street.

What part of speech is parallel in (k)? In (l)?
What is parallel showing in (k)? In (l)?
Rewrite sentence (k) using the phrase "draw a parallel between".
Rewrite sentence (l) using parallel as a verb.

6. equal

m. The cake was cut into equal pieces.
n. Sally and Susan are equal in height.
o. Thirteen tablespoons is equal to one cup.

What is equal comparing in each of these sentences?
In which sentence is equal a predicate adjective?
What follows equal in sentence (n)? In (o)?
Rewrite sentence (m) using the phrase "equal in".
Rewrite sentence (n) suing the phrase "equal to".

7. similar, comparable, analogous

   p. Though all birds have similar characteristics, you can distinguish between them.
   q. The four-horse carriage of the last century is comparable to the automobile of today.
   r. A computer is analogous to the human brain.

Which word compares things which are the most alike?
Which word compares things which are the most different?
About how many points in common does each word show?
Which word is more general in meaning than the others?
What preposition can follow these words?

Outside Study:

1. Find antonyms for words in the semantic field.

2. Look up these words: alike, uniform, corresponding, relevant.
   Where would you put them in the semantic field?

RELATIONSHIP I

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ONE OBJECT | | same[2] | | | | | | | | |
| TWO OBJECTS | GENERAL | same[1] | | | | parallel | equal | similar | | |
| | SPECIFIC | identical | equivalent | homogeneous | homologous | | | | comparable | analogous |
| | | NOT DISTINGUISHABLE | SAME RESULT, EFFECT, VALUE, ETC. | SAME STRUCTURE, COMPOSITION | CORRESPONDANCE IN EVOLUTIONARY DEVELOPMENT | NOT INTERSECTING, COURSE OVER TIME | SAME QUALITY, QUANTITY, DEGREE, LEVEL, SIZE, ETC. | MANY POINTS IN COMMON | SOME POINTS IN COMMON | USUALLY ONLY ONE POINT IN COMMON |

DISTINGUISHABLE

Adapted from the semantic field (p.104) in the Longman Dictionary of Scientific Usage

Exercise 2: Collocations

1. Put an appropriate preposition after each of the following words. Some can take more than one preposition. In these cases, in which situation is one preposition used as opposed to another?

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| same _____ | homologous _____ | similar _____ |
| identical _____ | parallel _____ | comparable ____ |
| equivalent _____ | equal _____ | analogous _____ |

2. Choose a phrase from the right which would most likely come after each of the following words on the left. There is often more than one possible answer.

| | |
|---|---|
| same _____ | development |
| identical _____ | characteristics |
| equivalent _____ | twins |
| parallel _____ | word in another language |
| equal _____ | thing |
| homogeneous _____ | distribution |
| similar _____ | in size |

3. Choose a phrase from the right which would most likely come before each of the following words on the left. Then write sentences from the collocations you have made.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| _____ | parallel between | in a |
| _____ | equivalent of | draw a |
| _____ | same thing | on |
| _____ | similar way | the |
| _____ | equal terms | amounts to the |

From this point, one can extend to other more specific exercises depending on the objectives of the class. For example, it is a necessary skill for university students to be able to define the technical words in their fields. Thus by following definitional formulae in their dic-

tionaries and using the semantic features and collocations they have learned from exercises 1 and 2, the students can then formulate definitions for the words in the fields, as the following exercise illustrates:

Exercise 3: Definitons

Following are some of the most common forms of definitions for adjectives found in your dictionary:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| containing<br>having | X | negative: | containing one or the words 'no', 'not', 'nothing', 'never', etc. |
| synonym(s) | | fruitless: | useless; unsuccessful |
| verb + ing | | drunken: | resulting from drinking too much alcohol. |
| not + antonym | | frugal: | not wasteful in the use of money, food, etc. |

Now that you have discovered the defining features of the words of relationship, use one of these definition forms to define the following:

1. same (not antonym)
2. parallel (verb + ing)
3. comparable (having X)
4. similar (having X)
5. analogous (containing X)
6. homogeneous (containing X)
7. equal (having X)
8. homologous (verb + ing)
9. identical (having X)

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